



Supervised Agricultural Experience

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SAE for Special Needs Students

The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) forbids discrimination against otherwise qualified individuals on the basis of a physical or mental handicap. The act is also designed to end most physical barriers to disabled persons in employment and in the use of accommodations, transportation and telecommunications.

The individualized learning opportunities created by an SAE make it a beneficial and positive activity for all students, including those with special needs. SAE programs such as livestock exhibition, horticulture, agricultural mechanics, job placement and others have proven to work well for these students with minor adaptations. Examples include using a private band radio to direct a blind student in the show ring or helping a student select and train a smaller breed of sheep to compensate for lack of physical strength. As with every SAE, record keeping skills and parental support, as well as student ability and behavior, must be considered.¹ Individual education programs (IEPs) and other school-based requirements should also be examined to determine SAE participation.

Every type of SAE program can be customized or simplified to meet specific needs. For example, an entrepreneurship SAE can be school-based and limited in scope (milk jug greenhouse, bottle biology). A placement SAE can be more repetitive in nature (animal feeder, greenhouse assistant). For a research-based SAE, a basic experiment such as determining which plant parts are best for growing cuttings is an option. The same thinking can be applied to career development events (CDEs). Students should not be discouraged from participation if minor modifications can be made to enable fair and full involvement.

The National FFA Organization has implemented policy for special needs accommodation at the national level including CDE participation, proficiency finalists and National Stars award events. Under this policy, accommodations can be made to make participation more accessible as long as it doesn't interfere with existing contest rules. For example, if a student has a learning disability such as dyslexia, the FFA will provide assistance to help the student read an event exam without giving an unfair advantage. Forms for special needs requests are available through the National FFA and must be filled out and supported by proper documentation to receive consideration.

Helpful Websites

- Council for Exceptional Children – www.cec.sped.org
- National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities – www.nichcy.org
- SNOW (Special Needs Opportunity Windows) – www.snow.utoronto.ca

¹ Cooper, Katie, Bocksnick, Jennifer & Frick, Martin (2002, November-December). "Trends in Working with Special Needs Students." *The Agricultural Education Magazine*, p.6-7.